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EXILED FROM MAIN STREET: IMPROVISATIONAL TEACHING/LIFE

I refuse to set goals. I scoff at resolutions, I look askance at plans, I wince at objectives, and I cringe at aims, targets, or whatever other weapon-related word is transmorgified to describe a part of my life that deserves strategic attack.

However, I do not entirely ignore the future. I applied for a Fulbright Fellowship with a deadline more than a year ahead of the starting date. I send proposals in for conferences that are months in the future; I meet deadlines for CFPs and other aspects of my profession that require a long timeline forward. But the difference, to me, is that rather than set a goal to do something, I simply do it if I want to do it.

Perhaps this is too fine a distinction; goals are generally desires that people express wanting to do. I don't disagree, but I emphasize the nuance – goals are aspirational and presume a combination of effort and life adjustments and various factors we call *luck* to accomplish them, while the things I decide I want to do require a combination of luck and, well, more luck, because I am *already* putting in the effort and someone else *always* decides its success.

That aspect of my work as a university professor relates primarily to scholarship, for in my teaching, I am required to create or borrow "learning objectives" or "learning outcomes" that students will accomplish during a semester in my class. The idea behind these outcomes are obviously goal-oriented – provide a set of knowledge that students don't have, and if they set the goal to succeed, or in other words put in the effort and are lucky, they will walk away from this class with that box in their hands, or heads. While my syllabi have these learning targets on them, I have no idea what they are because I never look at them again after placing them in their designated spot. I don't set specific goals for student learning, for I don't have a box of knowledge on the shelf ready to hand over to my students. Instead, I offer an opportunity to learn something, anything, along *with* me.

That is why I improvise.

By setting goals, or learning outcomes, for a course, teachers and students are comforted by the certainty of what will occur during those four months, and they can assure themselves that they are accomplishing something tangible that has been deemed deserving of the larger set of knowledge representing a legitimate college degree. That tangibility, along with accreditation policies, backs its way into the mind of a professor so that we set out a detailed semester schedule, knowing ahead of time what we will cover each day. I have done that; it has been helpful to think about the planning in advance so that when I

have a busy week, I can glance at my schedule and know what I need to read and cover in my classes, which is hardly goal-oriented.

With experience comes familiarity and practice, and our need to plan diminishes, despite being often warned against laziness or ennui. I know some professors who give the same lecture corresponding to the same day on the schedule each time they teach a class. Over time this becomes a finely tuned lecture, open to adjustments, but perfected so that even the jokes are timed well. I can't seem to do that. Granted, like most teachers, I can talk for the entire period in any course I teach with no notes, topics completely dependent on student questions, current events, or my inclination, but it is *never* close to the same as a previous period.

I walk into my classroom with a vague idea of how to begin, with some question, poignant or bland, based on my loose schedule of readings, some of which I haven't even read recently. Some students affectionately call me a "wild card," because they don't know what will happen – the syllabus long since jettisoned. But they still show up. What happens in these improvisational moments is learning, but it isn't anticipated, categorized, assessed or planned for "properly." It can't be planned for, because the outcome is always already open to possibility – or failure. I recognize potential failure with slight feelings of dread before class, that sometimes the night-at-the-improv crowd doesn't laugh, they don't appreciate the reference, the irony, or the absurdity of the sketch. Yet the dread hardly lasts; as a teacher, I seem to be becoming less a master of my field's knowledge and more an improviser performing on an intimate stage where I give students access to a range of knowledge by hanging out with me for a few hours each week.

As I write this, I am living an unexpectedly improvised life. I know my life is not unique, but in improvising nearly every aspect of my life for a period of time I understand why nearly every cultural norm or institution attempts to *avoid* and *prevent* improvisation through stability, planning, and predictability. Because of marital difficulties, my wife and I have been separating off and on in a way that allows our children to remain in the same house. A friend owns a second home and generously allowed us to use it, so we trade off spending half the week at home and the rest of our week at the friend's house. While this has kept some ostensible stability for the children, it has not allowed for much stability for the two of us. Not only have we packed up clothes and food twice each week for ourselves, but all future plans as a family are suddenly indefinite.

On the micro-level and the macro-level, life became transitory and unplanned. To the chagrin of people around me, especially my wife, I became reticent to make any plans more than one day ahead. As any parent knows, separation doesn't mean lack of interaction or the possible need to be together or change the "separation plan" to adjust to children's events. Yet because of strong emotions still involved in the separation, there have been desires to stabilize things occasionally with a plan. This could be a dinner to talk about things, or a family weekend trip. Not only that, but in the newfound "freedom" of a separation, which can be lonely and depressing, I feel a desire to offset those feelings with ventures I wouldn't have done or couldn't have before. With a weekend on my own, for example, I can drive to a nearby city and hang out for a couple of days. Within the "stability" of a family and its expectations and obligations for 15 years, that option of leaving for that city at 4:00 on a Friday without telling anyone, not knowing whether the trip would be overnight, two nights, or a late-night drive back, was largely unthinkable.

Cue Sartre's admission that we are "condemned to be free."

Having no plans truly makes each day its own thing, and living in the present is the most real it has ever been. But it is not as if in being so completely in the present provides more focus – a lot of that "present" time is spent wondering what the next hour or next day or next week will bring. In that sense, being able to focus on the present requires the stability of not wondering. And that is the crux of improvisation, the contradiction – it is a luxury to be able to pause and reflect on anything, as we are no longer feudal peasants whose day is wholly consumed with labor. But in setting up camp, in stabilizing our lives with marriage, commitment, the "work" day, time schedules, etc., we reduce the time of wondering. And that bleeds into everything else – education is one evident cause and symptom of our susceptibility to certainty. M. Swann, in Proust's *Swann's Way*, recognizes "how restful it was to stop asking himself his unanswerable questions and to transfer to someone else the fatigue of interrogation," but nevertheless sought more concrete information regarding Odette, because "knowing a thing does not always allow us to prevent it, but at least the things we know, we hold, if not in our hands, at any rate in our minds, where we can arrange them as we like, which gives us the illusion of a sort of power over them" (327).

Like Swann, in our relationships we seek to "know" rather to wonder what is happening with the other person. Then, as teachers we are encouraged to clarify what is there to be known, what the outcome of our classroom time will be. And someone always wants us to be accountable for it. We take comfort or find security in knowing the bad and the good, for knowing is always better.

Or is knowing an illusion?

Once, during this period of separation, I woke up screaming. Not a fearful scream, but a scream that rose from the core of my body, stuck in the brain, woke me up to the fact that the events of the past week needed release, and I screamed like I never have before. Guttural, loud, and long. I was alone in a house, and when the first scream tapered off, I screamed again. Fully awake but aware of the partial relief that my waking-up scream provided. And yet it was still difficult to crawl out of bed…

Exile for me means improvisation, making decisions in the very moment, letting the body express itself and recognizing its powerlessness. For most of our early life, the aim of our parents, our teachers, our lovers, and our friends is to rationally skirt those in-the-moment decisions, for this stabilizes things, makes life routine, manageable, and sensible – in the sense that a calendar on the wall will help everyone keep all the weekly activities straight and any craziness can be anticipated and alleviated – and that makes life pleasant. My separation situation is exile – the friend's house is 25 minutes from town, set in the woods near a lake, only one other house visible through the surrounding trees and no more than a dozen houses in five square miles. There is no Internet access, no cable, but there is cell service. In this house I am alone, totally. Occasionally there is something in town that I must attend – other days there is no necessary get-out-of-bed time and no breakfast to be made for children, no helping them with homework, no getting them ready for school and on the bus. All of my time is my own.

And with that time, I listen and dance to CD's on the sound system; make and eat simple meals; text friends; go walking or running on the isolated, hilly road; play pool by myself in the basement; read a book; watch a DVD; put together a puzzle; write, write, write. At any moment of the day I am in full control of what I do, and feel only obligated to my own physical and intellectual health. I know it is temporary; after three days I will return to town

and utilize the internet and other luxuries of our time, do laundry for the family, wake up early and get the kids ready for school, be home when they get home, help them do homework, take them to dance class or gymnastics class, hear them laugh, cry, whine, and talk about their days, and let them take over my time. This is its own improvisation, for despite that calendar, every moment with them can potentially explode the plan – that's what children are best at doing, and why their early learning years burst with a pace of knowledge never again matched.

Capturing that chaotic pace of learning again in my classroom, or at least attempting it, underlies the improvisational nature of my teaching. And while improvisation befits my style and personality, I am exiled by administrators who express dissatisfaction with my (un)accountable methods and question my resistance to strategies and tactics. Rather than a quantitative illusion of knowledge to sort through and control, I offer merely memorable stories of student epiphanies or abject failure – apathy stories being common and dull. Luckily, I have tenure, but my future remains as unknown as the actual learning outcomes of my students.

References

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